Looking at Language

All-American Dialects

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

I have tongue and will travel, so I run around the country speaking to groups of teachers, students, librarians, women’s clubbers, guild professionals, and corporate clients. These good people go to all the trouble of putting together meetings and conferences, and I walk in, share my thoughts about language in their lives, and imbibe their collective energy and synergy. I will go anywhere to spread the word about words, and in going anywhere from California to the New York Island, from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters, I hear America singing. We are teeming nations within a nation, a nation that is like a world. We talk in melodies of infinite variety; we dance to their sundry measures and lyrics.

Midway through John Steinbeck’s epic novel The Grapes of Wrath young Ivy observes, “Ever’body says words different. Arkansas folks says ‘em different, and Oklahoma folks says ‘em different. And we seen a lady from Massachusetts, an’ she said ‘em differentest of all. Couldn’t hardly make out what she was sayin’.”

One aspect of American rugged individualism is that not all of us say the same word in the same way. Sometimes we don’t even use the same name for the same object.

I was born and grew up in Philadelphia a coon’s age, a blue moon, and a month of Sundays ago—when Hector was a pup. Phillufia, or Philly, which is what we kids called the city, was where the epicurean delight made with cold cuts, cheese, tomatoes, pickles, and onions stuffed into a long, hard-crusted Italian bread loaf was invented.

The creation of that sandwich took place in the Italian pushcart section of the city, known as Hog Island. Some linguists contend that it was but a short leap from Hog Island to hoagie, while others claim that the label hoagie arose because only a hog had the appetite or the technique to eat one properly.

As a young adult I moved to northern New England (N’Hampsha, to be specific), where the same sandwich designed to be a meal in itself is called a grinder—because you need a good set of grinders to chew them. But my travels around the United States have revealed that the hoagie or grinder is called at least a dozen other names—a bomber, Garibaldi (after the Italian liberator), hero, Italian sandwich, rocket, sub, submarine (which is what they call it in Garibaldi, after the Italian liberator), hero, Italian sandwich, worm, or redworm? Is a larger worm a dew worm, night crawler, night walker, or town worm?

Is it a cock horse, dandle, hicky horse, horse, horse tilt, ridy horse, seesaw, teeter, teeterboard, teetering horse, teeter-totter, tilt, tilting board, tinter, tinter board, or tippity bounce?

Do fisherpersons employ an angledog, angleworm, baitworm, earthworm, eaceworm, fishworm, mudworm, rainworm, or redworm? Is a larger worm a dew worm, night crawler, night walker, or town worm?

Is it a crabfish, clawfish, craw, crawdad, crawdadd, craw-daddy, crawfish, crawler, cayfish, creekcrab, crowfish, freshwater lobster, ghost shrimp, mudbug, spiny lobster, or yabby?

Depends where you live and who or whom it is you’re talking to.

I figger, figure, guess, imagine, opine, reckon, and suspect that my being bullheaded, contrary, headstrong, muley, mulish, ornery, otsny, pigheaded, set, sot, stubborn, or utsy about this whole matter of dialects makes you sick to, in, or at your stomach.

But I assure you that, when it comes to American dialects, I’m not speaking fahdoodle, flumaddiddle, flummydiddle, or flurrididdle—translation: nonsense. I’m no all-thumbs-and-no-fingers, all-knees-and-elbows, all-left-feet, antigoddling, bumfuzled, discombobulated, flusterated, or foozled bumptik, cloddhopper, country jake, hayseed, hick, hillbilly, hoosier, jackpine savage, mossback, mountain-boomer, pumpkin-
husker, rail-splitter, rube, sodbuster, stump farmer, swamp angel, yahoo, or yokel.

The biblical book of Judges (12:4-6) tells us how one group of speakers used the word *shibboleth*, Hebrew for “stream,” as a military password. The Gileadites had defeated the Ephraimites in battle and were holding some narrow places on the Jordan River that the fleeing Ephraimites had to cross to get home. In those days it was hard to tell one kind of soldier from another because soldiers didn’t wear uniforms.

The Gileadites knew that the Ephraimites spoke a slightly different dialect of Hebrew and could be recognized by their inability to pronounce an initial sh sound. Thus, each time a soldier wanted to cross the river, “the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay, then they said unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time forty and two thousand.”

Any glossary of Southernspeak would be incomplete without “yawl: a bunch of you’s.” When I visited Alexandria, Louisiana, a local pastor offered me proof that y’all has biblical origins, especially in the letters of the apostle Paul: “We give thanks to God always for you all” (First Epistle to the Thessalonians, 1:2) and “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all” (First Epistle to the Romans, 1:8). “Obviously,” the good reverend told me, “Saint Paul was a Southerner.” Then he added, “Thank you, Yankee visitor, for appreciating our beloved Southernspeak. We couldn’t talk without it!”

An anonymous poem that I came upon in Louisville, Kentucky, clarifies the plural use of the one-syllable pronoun y’all:

> Y’all gather ‘round from far and near,  
> Both city folk and rural,  
> And listen while I tell you this:  
> The pronoun y’all is plural.

> If I should utter, “Y’all come down,  
> Or we-all shall be lonely,”  
> I mean at least a couple folks,  
> And not one person only.

> If I should say to Hiram Jones,  
> “I think that y’all are lazy,”  
> Or “Will y’all let me use y’all’s knife?”  
> He’d think that I was crazy.

> Don’t think I mean to criticize  
> Or that I’m full of gall,  
> But when we speak of one alone,  
> We all say “you,” not “y’all.”

If the truth about dialects be told, we all have accents. Many New Englanders drop the r in cart and farm and say callt and fahm. Thus, the midwesterner’s “park the car in Harvard Yard” becomes the New Englander’s “pahk the cah in Hahvahd Yahd.” But those r’s aren’t lost. A number of

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**Dictionary of Southernisms:**

- *ah:* organ for seeing
- *are:* sixty minutes
- *arn:* ferrous metal
- *ass:* frozen water
- *ast:* questioned
- *bane:* small, kidney-shaped vegetable
- *bar:* seek and receive a loan; grizzly
- *bold:* heated in water
- *card:* one who lacks courage
- *farst:* a lot of trees
- *fur:* distance
- *har:* to employ
- *hep:* to assist
- *hire yew:* a greeting
- *paw tree:* verse
- *rat:* opposite of left
- *reckonize:* to see
- *tarred:* exhausted
- *t’mar:* day following t’day
- *thang:* item
- *thank:* to cogitate
upper northeasterners, including the famous Kennedy family of Massachusetts, add r’s to words, such as idear and Caber when those words come before a vowel or at the end of a sentence.

When an amnesia victim appeared at a truck stop in Missouri in the fall of 1987, authorities tried in vain to help her discover her identity. Even after three months, police “ran into a brick wall,” according to the Columbia Daily Tribune. Then, linguist Donald Lance of the University of Missouri-Columbia was called in to analyze her speech. After only a few sentences, Lance recognized the woman’s West Pennsylvania dialect, and, within one month, police in Pittsburgh located the woman’s family.

Among the clues used to pinpoint the woman’s origin was the West-Pennsylvanian use of greezy, instead of greasy, and teeter-totter, rather than seesaw. Dialectologists know that people who pronounce the word as greezy usually live south of a line that wiggles across the northern parts of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

Linguist Roger Shuy writes about the reactions of Illinois residents in a 1962 survey of regional pronunciations, including the soundings of greezy: “The northern Illinois informants felt the southern pronunciation was crude and ugly; it made them think of a very messy, dirty, sticky, smelly frying pan. To the southern and midland speakers, however, the northern pronunciation connoted a messy, dirty, sticky, smelly skillet.”

Using the tools of his trade, Shuy was able to accurately profile Ted Kaczynski, the elusive Unabomber who terrorized the nation through the 1990s. Culling linguistic evidence from Kaczynski’s “Manifesto,” published in the New York Times, and the notes and letters accompanying the bombs, Shuy deduced the Unabomber’s geographical origin, religious background, age, and education level.

Among the clues were the Unabomber’s use of sierras to mean “mountains,” an indication that the writer had spent some time living in northern California. In his “Manifesto” Kaczynski used expressions common to a person who was a young adult in the 1960s—Holy Robots, working stiff, and playing foosy. His employment of sociological terms, such as other directed, and his many references to individual drives suggested an acquaintance with the sociology in vogue during the sixties, particularly that of David Reisman. The complexity of Kaczynski’s sentence structure, including the subjunctive mood, and the learnedness of his vocabulary, such as the words surrogate, sublimate, overspecialization, and tautology, pointed to someone highly educated.

All these conclusions were verified when Kaczynski was captured: He was in his early fifties, he had grown up in Chicago, he had lived for a time in northern California, and he was well educated, having once been a university professor.

Now is the time to face the fact that you speak a dialect. When you learned language, you learned it as a dialect; if you don’t speak a dialect, you don’t speak. Dialect isn’t a label for careless, unlettered, nonstandard speech. A dialect isn’t something to be avoided or cured. Each language is a great pie. Each slice of that pie is a dialect, and no single slice is the language. Don’t try to change your language into the kind of English that nobody really speaks. Be proud of your slice of the pie.

In the early 1960s, Steinbeck decided to rediscover America in a camper with his French poodle Charley. The writer reported his observations in a book called Travels with Charley (1962) and included these thoughts on American dialects:

One of my purposes was to listen, to hear speech, accent, speech rhythms, overtones, and emphasis. For speech is so much more than words and sentences. I did listen everywhere. It seemed to me that regional speech is in the process of disappearing, not gone but going. Forty years of radio and twenty years of television must have this impact. Communications must destroy localness by a slow, inevitable process.

I can remember a time when I could almost pinpoint a man’s place of origin by his speech. That is growing more difficult now and will in some foreseeable future become impossible. It is a rare house or building that is not rigged with spiky combers of the air. Radio and television speech becomes standardized, perhaps better English than we have ever used. Just as our bread, mixed and baked, packaged and sold without benefit of accident or human frailty, is uniformly good and uniformly tasteless, so will our speech become one speech.

Forty years have passed since Steinbeck made that observation, and the hum and buzz of electronic voices have since permeated almost every home across our nation. Formerly, the psalmist tells us, “the voice of the turtle was heard in the land,” but now it is the voice of the broadcaster, with his or her immaculately groomed diction. I hope that American English does not turn into a bland, homogenized, pasteurized, assemblyline product. May our bodacious American English remain tasty and nourishing—full of flavor, variety, and local ingredients.

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reported speech. Looking at language. LISTENING School announcements and. LISTENING â€œBurger Dayâ€œ. Unhealthy food? Looking at language. WRITING Beginning and ending letters. LISTENING Ericâ€™s day at the restaurant. However, this needs to be looked at with caution, as Trotta (2003), highlights in his article about Looking at language in The Sopranos. Trotta emphasises the "dilemma". The following phrases are examples of irregular concord and show that the subject and the verb do not agree with each other, and are therefore non-standard English according to Trotta (2003). I weren't instead of I wasn't and don't it instead of doesn't it.